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Using object-based activities and an online inquiry platform to support learners' engagement with their heritage language and culture

Koula Charitonos¹, Marina Charalampidi², and Eileen Scanlon³

Abstract. Heritage language education is distinct from the field of second language acquisition due to having the concept of identity always at its core (Leeman, Rabin, & Roman-Mendoza, 2012). This paper draws on this concept and presents an action research study focusing on the teaching and learning of Greek as a heritage language in the context of Supplementary Education in the UK. The main aim of the study is to support young learners in gaining an understanding of how language is intertwined with social and cultural aspects. The study took place in two Greek Supplementary Schools in UK during the academic year 2015-16. The participants are learners of Greek language attending pre-GCSE, GCSE and A'Level classes (13-17 years old). For the purposes of this study, the learners used mobile and web-based technologies, i.e. nQuire-It platform (<http://www.nquire-it.org>), to explore their environment through specific missions. The study involved a number of classroom sessions, attendance of an inter-generational object-handling workshop run by educators based at the British Museum at each of the two schools, and also participation in a museum visit. The paper presents this study and shares some preliminary findings and insights regarding the integration of mobile technologies within heritage language learning and teaching.

Keywords: heritage language learning, supplementary education, inquiry learning, mobile technologies, young people.

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1. Introduction

At the outset of this paper is a recognition of the fundamental relationship between language and culture and an acknowledgment that this relationship is central to any process of learning another language. Especially in the context of heritage language education where the concept of identity is at its core (Leeman et al., 2012), and young learners are seen as having an emotional connection to the culture and language of the country of origin, such ideas cannot simply be seen as a body of knowledge to be taught. Rather, it is important to view learners' "lived experience" (Anderson & Chung, 2012, p. 262) of the culture and language as a framework in which learners live their lives and communicate shared meanings with each other in their communities. In other words, we draw on a view of language as a social practice (see e.g. Kramsch, 1998), hence our intention in this paper is to move beyond a view of language simply related to acquiring grammar and vocabulary. Instead, our view of language "requires learners to engage in tasks in which they create and interpret meaning, and in which they communicate their own personal meanings and develop personal connections with the new language and culture" (Scarino & Liddicoat, 2009, p. 17).

The paper presents a small exploratory study undertaken by practitioners that draws on a blended approach to learning and utilises methods of inquiry learning (e.g. observation, data collection, reflection) and mobile technologies to facilitate young people's engagement in their learning. It largely builds upon formal instruction in the language classroom and "draws attention to a learning design that blends the physical and the digital contexts [as the study] locates itself within a body of research seeking to identify more clearly a pedagogical approach to the use of technology in a learning setting" (Charitonos & Charalampidi, 2015, p. 198).

2. Context

2.1. Supplementary education

As discussed by Charitonos and Charalampidi (2015), community languages in the UK "are typically taught in supplementary/complementary schools. These schools offer educational support (language, core curriculum, faith and culture) and other out-of-school activities to children attending mainstream schools (Evans & Gillan-Thomas, 2015) [and] operate in community centres, youth clubs, religious institutions and mainstream schools" (p. 199).

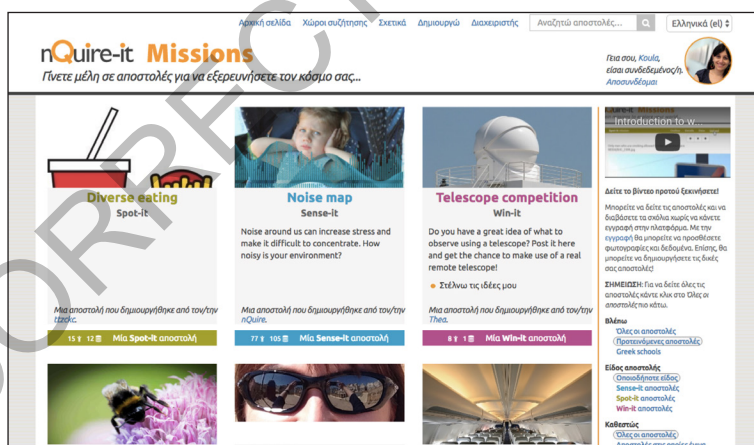
2.2. Participants

The participants are learners of Greek Language attending pre-GCSE, GCSE and A'Level classes (13-17 years old) in two Greek Supplementary Schools in Buckinghamshire (N=11) and Leicestershire (N=10). The participants were attending language lessons once a week for an average of three hours in total.

2.3. nQuire-It platform

The project takes place on the online Citizen Inquiry platform nQuire-It (<http://www.nquire-it.org>), which has been designed as part of the project nQuire: Young Citizen Inquiry, coordinated by the Open University in UK. The aim of the platform is to assist citizens in conducting their own science investigations, enhancing the social investigation aspect and promoting scientific thinking and exploration of the world. Two types of missions that are available in the nQuire-it platform were used in the study: (1) Spot-it missions, a user uploads pictures for the data collection and (2) Win-it missions, a user responds to a question which requires text as an answer. For the purposes of this study, and thanks to funding received, the platform was translated in Greek (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Screenshot of the nQuire-It platform in Greek

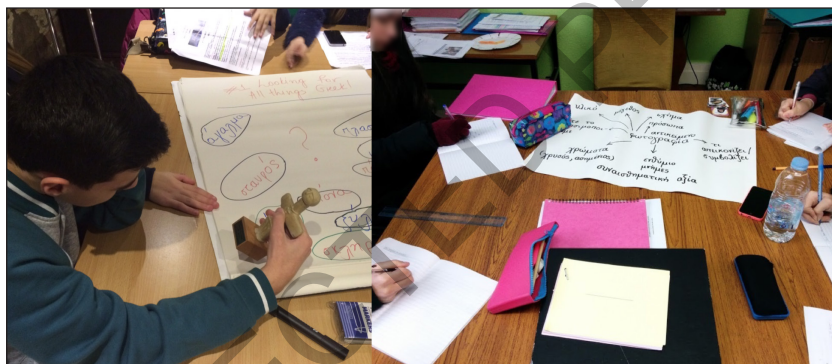


2.4. Activities

The study consisted of a number of designed lessons involving face-to-face and online activities with specific goals that spanned over several sessions. Whole-

class sessions in the classroom focused on selected aspects of the curriculum (e.g. vocabulary, i.e. nouns, connectives, adjectives; speaking, i.e. talk about routines and habits, describing objects). Additionally, the study sought to provide young learners with access to cultural experiences, hence it involved an intergenerational object-handling workshop run by educators based at the British Museum at each of the two participating schools around the theme of ‘Object Journeys’, and participation in a visit to the British Museum around the theme of ‘People’s Journeys’ (Figure 2). Whereas the museum educators ran the activities in English, the participants were given the option to select any of the two languages in the tasks assigned to them and associated interactions. To ensure that all felt included, translation in both languages was provided by the teachers.

Figure 2. Activities in the classroom



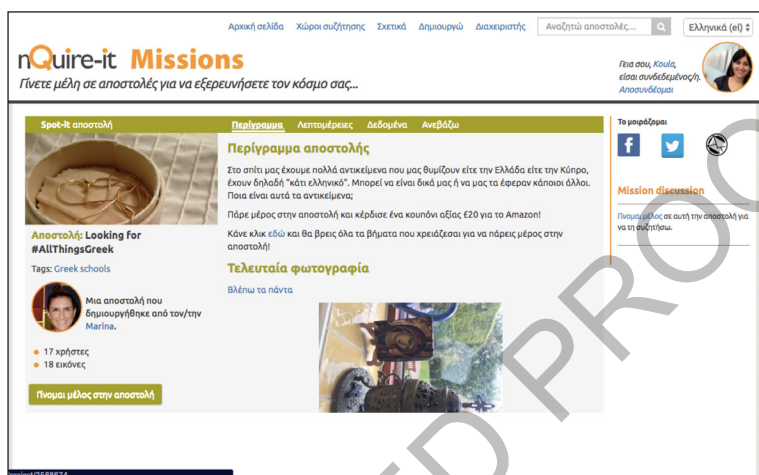
The online missions that have been created on the nQuire-It platform involved questions related to the learners’ everyday life (e.g. ‘ItsAHabit’) or their material environment heritage (e.g. ‘Looking for #AllThingsGreek’, ‘My very own museum’). These initial missions were initiated by the two teachers, with an aim to engage learners with aspects of inquiry learning (e.g. observation, data collection, reflection). Students were asked to use only Greek on the online platform. An example of a mission is described in the following section.

3. Example: mission ‘Looking for #AllThingsGreek’

The Spot-It mission ‘Looking for #AllThingsGreek’ involved participants exploring their environment and taking photographs of objects that could be associated with, or remind them of Cyprus or Greece. 17 users joined this mission on the nQuire-It platform and 18 photos were uploaded (Figure 3). The members of this mission

could make comments and like other contributions and had the opportunity to win the prize for the best photograph.

Figure 3. Mission on the nQuire-It platform: ‘Looking for #AllThingsGreek’



Each mission involved preparatory and follow-up activities in the classroom. For example, prior to the mission ‘Looking for #AllThingsGreek’, students explored their school to spot objects that could be linked to Cyprus or Greece and provided descriptions and explanations in Greek related to their choice of particular objects. A follow-up activity took place in the classroom, where students had the opportunity to examine the whole data set of the photos uploaded on the platform, and, through group interactions and facilitated discussion with the teacher, to engage with observations, analysis and reflection. This activity is described in detail in a forthcoming publication (see Charitonos, forthcoming).

Preliminary findings from this mission point to students being engaged in this task, describing the objects and communicating their meanings around the objects that could be found in their own environments, such as souvenirs, faith items, crafts, and everyday objects. Students were able to make the connection between the physical and the digital contexts, though not all uploaded their photos online. Another finding is that students’ own experiences with technology determined their engagement with the platform. For example, participants were asking for an app to directly upload pictures on the nQuire-It platform. In addition to this, it became apparent through their discussions with their teachers that a few shared some feelings of anxiety in creating and posting comments in Greek online. Issues

of anxiety related to performance in the language-in-focus might have been a barrier in students' participation. Finally, schools' infrastructures (i.e. no internet connection) are seen as a limitation in students' participation in the study.

4. Conclusions

The paper presented a small exploratory study that follows a learner-centred pedagogical approach in examining the integration of mobile and web-technologies in the language classroom in a way that allows young learners to engage in the social and cultural contexts they are embedded in. By blending the physical and the digital domains, and structuring students' engagement in and through missions, students could gather evidence, and offer descriptions and interpretations. The initial missions were initiated by the two teachers, but future plans include providing a general topic (e.g. Discovering your High Street) and giving control over the missions, the design, and how to carry out the investigation to the students. Future investigations could also draw on concepts (e.g. tradition) that emerge from data generated by students to generate new missions that will serve to challenge students' established ideas (e.g. What is tradition?).

5. Acknowledgements

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